

One Belt, Competing Metaphors: The Struggle Over Strategic Narrative in English-Language News Media

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This article studies the reception by English-language news media of a strategic narrative deployed by the Chinese state to reposition China in the world. Metaphor analysis is conducted on 816 articles from six countries or regions at the time of a summit in Beijing about the US\$5 trillion Belt and Road Initiative to trace the impact of the symbolic work done by China on Western representations. The analysis, combining computer-assisted analysis of the corpus with close analysis of each text, identifies the widespread use of a set of conventional metaphors that reinforce the Chinese state's geopolitical shift, but also frequent and sometimes highly conscious use of novel metaphors that cast doubt on official Chinese discourse and foreground it as a geopolitical move. The analysis reveals a global English-language imaginary that both extends beyond long-standing stereotypes of China and displays an ironic and critical attitude toward China's strategic self-positioning. The article argues for the importance of investigating strategic narrative as a rhetorical performance.

Keywords: strategic narrative, metaphor analysis, corpus analysis, Belt and Road, China, globalization

Analysis of the image that China's central government projects of the nation often emphasizes the use of distinctive versions of communist and nationalist narratives to make sense of its shift toward a market economy (e.g., Liao, 2017). The current political moment in China is unusual, however, in introducing a confident narrative of China's position in the world that it has exported via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This scheme to build and invest in infrastructure, energy projects, and related initiatives with 65–70 other countries and regions has developed since the announcement of the New

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Silk Road in 2013 and reached its current form in 2017 as the BRI (also known as One Belt, One Road). Its aim is grand: to reposition China in the world through investment initiatives, trade agreements, and infrastructure projects on an enormous scale—some estimates put its spending at US\$5 trillion (van der Leer & Yau, 2016).

The investment is central to the initiative, but it can also be read in terms of what Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) would term a new "strategic narrative" about the global system. The BRI is a strategy to place China at the heart of trading networks—perhaps even for China to "establish itself as the world's main economic power" (Brînză, 2018, para. 13). Yet, as strategic narrative scholars note, such metastories about the positions of countries are contested and slow to change because they are deeply engrained in geopolitical understandings. This article explores one key site where geopolitical understandings are established, the news media. Using a combined computational and manual metaphor analysis of English-language news texts, we find evidence that the imaginary of China is inflected by the BRI, but in ways that limit and even deny its discursive power.

The Chinese BRI Discourse

The BRI represents "China's new thinking about open development and China going-abroad" (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 325) and is accompanied by a distinctive Chinese state language of "inclusive globalization" (Liu, Tian, & Ou, 2017). The overarching metaphor of the Silk Road links back to the trading and cultural history of Eurasia and Africa, forming a "'soft' basis for international cooperation" (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 326) that explicitly steps outside old characterizations of China and addresses the contemporary context of globalized trade. This imagery is designed to appeal to China's economic partners but also draws on a broader set of what Hinck, Manly, Kluver, and Norris (2016) term "cultural scripts" of China's place in the world. Analyzing Chinese-language domestic media, which Hinck et al. argue are closely aligned with official discourse, they find three scripts: One focused on China as a historical victim of others' aggression but committed to peaceful development; one focused on the "China Dream" (中国梦, pinyin: zhongguo meng) of China's return to strength and cultural self-confidence and the resulting promise of economic development for the country and its neighbors; and one advocating a new, more collaborative style of great-power relations, in contrast to cold war thinking.

The BRI, as an outward-facing initiative, is not reducible to these domestic scripts of China's place in the world, but scholars' findings on the official discourse on the BRI share commonalities. Chinese leaders' speeches use imagery of "opening doors" (Lu, 2017, para. 19), "deepen...cooperation" (Wang, 2015a, para. 13), creating "a big family of harmonious co-existence" (Xi, 2017, para. 43), and being "not a solo but a symphony" (Wang, 2015b, para. 20), which emphasize that China's economic development and its collaboration with others can be mutually beneficial. Dong and Yue (2018) note that President Xi's speech to the May 2017 BRI Summit was rich with this "Silk Road spirit," particularly using language of building connection (such as, "a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation" [Xi, 2017, para. 9]), of giving new growth to ancient roots and of treasure-laden merchant ships rather than warships. Chen and Liu (2016) found similar imagery of friendship, flourishing growth, and a shared feast in Chinese financial reports on the BRI that connect with ideas of China as a confident, peaceful, post-cold war regional partner.

In contrast to this Chinese discourse, representations of China in English-language news media are often one-dimensional. China is represented as authoritarian and isolationist, and as a strange-but-familiar other (Seib & Powers, 2010; Thussu, 2000; Xin & Matheson, 2015). The paucity of either in-depth understanding or informed critique of China supports Clausen's (2004) analysis that news of other countries tends to be represented through domestic interests. However, the launch in May 2017 of a global forum on the BRI in Beijing attended by world leaders and the significant domestic interest in many places in the initiative opens up a moment for looking again, given the inadequacy of that imaginary to describe China's energetic initiative to engage in the global.²

Strategic Narrative Approach

In this article we analyze the representation, in English-language news media from six countries or regions,³ of the BRI throughout the period around the May 2017 global forum. We do so through close analysis of the metaphoric rather than looking for evidence of China's strategic narrative being taken up. As noted above, a significant part of the Chinese state's discursive work is done through figurative language, beginning from the invocation of the ancient Silk Road and the goal to connect a "belt" of countries across Eurasia.

We build here on Roselle et al.'s (2014) argument that political influence on the global stage cannot be understood without studying how it is enacted in discourse. They point to "soft power" as too capacious a term for influence, as it too often focuses on the resources possessed by various states and too rarely on how those resources are used. They argue for international relations to return to "what means and methods of persuasion and influence are likely to work under what conditions, and to a focus on those conditions of communication and interaction" (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 71). For them, that means studying the narratives that are produced; how those narratives are mediated within journalism, social media, and other communicative practices; and how they are then received. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017) seek to define the analytical object of this school of thought as follows: "Strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (p. 6). The analytic problem they identify is partly one of how consensus is fostered around shared meaning and of how those claims to consensus are negated or contested. Narratives "explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests . . . Narratives can be a power resource setting out what characterizes any state in the world, or how the world works" (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 74).

Strategic narrative analysis focuses particularly on grand narratives, such as the cold war or globalization or the United States as world bully. It therefore risks remaining somewhat disconnected

² Since this study was undertaken, a trade war has begun between the United States and China. The impact of that on the global imaginary does not form part of the analysis here.

³ African media are not represented by one country's news outlets but by all news content from across African media that fit the search criteria, because no one country's outlets produced enough texts for analysis.

from the specifics of the symbols and texts that reference those narratives. Analysis of metaphors provides an opportunity to focus analysis so that the broader questions about attempts to wield such discursive power to explain the world and to position state actors and whole nations can be subjected to empirical scrutiny. This article follows scholars such as Chaban and Kelly (2017) who argue that metaphors are particularly valuable for studying attempts to create shared meanings. As mentioned above, the BRI is an initiative couched in metaphoric terms in China, reflecting a Chinese tradition of learning that values analogy (Jin & Cortazzi, 2008), so it is particularly well suited for metaphor analysis. This article looks for evidence of the response to the Chinese state's metaphoric discourse in two interrelated ways: first tracking patterns in metaphor use in a large body of news texts via corpus analytic tools, then closely analyzing each text for metaphors.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The article draws on conceptual metaphor theory (especially Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Rather than regard metaphors as primarily poetic and literary devices, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show that metaphor is ubiquitous in language use and in thinking. This, they claim, is because we think metaphorically—metaphor in language reflects conventional thought structures in our minds. Consequently, metaphor can be considered a cognitive mechanism through which discourses and, by extension, social reality are formulated. As Sontag (1978, 1989) and numerous others (Burke, 1945, 1950; Deetz, 1984; Ortony, 1993; Ricoeur, 1978, 1981) have made clear, metaphor is integral to human understanding, an inescapable aspect of human thought. Metaphors provide individuals and cultures with ways to comprehend otherwise perplexing and complex issues, such as life, death, health, war, and peace. Metaphor thus has offered an important tool to probe news reporting on complex subjects such as social movements (Neveu, 2002), the information highway (Berdayes & Berdayes, 1998), AIDS (Sontag, 1989), conflict in Kosovo (Kennedy, 2000; Paris, 2002), cloning (Hellsten, 2000; Nerlich, Clarke, & Dingwall, 2000), and international affairs (Kitis & Milapides, 1997).

Charteris-Black (2003) shows that, to achieve its purpose, metaphor requires the listener to draw on shared cultural knowledge. Metaphor use can therefore differ according to cultural background; and at the same time it can pull listeners into alignment with one culture's assumptions or with an ideology (see also Deignan, 2003; Littlemore, 2003; Trompenaars, 1993). Metaphor studies of news are often conducted with the goal of revealing ideologies and persuasive messages (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2004; Chiang & Duann, 2007; Kitis & Milapides, 1997; Musolff, 2006; Santa Ana, 1999). These studies commonly focus on a particular topic, for instance, on the metaphorical framing of immigrant discourse ("flow of immigrants," the "tide and flow of illegal immigration" [Santa Ana, 1999, p. 206]). Others have examined specific metaphors, such as the metaphorical construction of Europe as a house ("under a European roof," "cornerstone of the Union" [Musolff, 2000, p. 103]). Foss (2018) claims that "shifting metaphors means changing perspectives—making new connections and therefore seeing in new ways—for both the creator and the audience" (p. 289). The metaphor is therefore both a powerful rhetorical tool and an indicator for analysts of conceptual structures being deployed in representations.

Metaphors are studied in this article in terms of their strategic power to create shared meanings that feed into strategic narratives. Metaphor is not reducible directly to narrative, as it works to evaluate

something rather than to plot it over time (Grishakova, 2001). Yet, as Ricoeur (1984) notes, the two forms of making meaning do similar cognitive work in redescribing and therefore intervening in what came before a particular text.

Methods for Identifying and Analyzing Metaphors

Metaphors link two semantic domains. Semantic analysis of large corpus of text may therefore allow metaphoric usages to be systematically studied. Koller, Hardie, Rayson, and Semino (2008) have developed a system for metaphor analysis based on a semantic tagger (USAS) that is part of a corpus-analysis tool called WMatrix at the University of Lancaster (Rayson, 2008).⁴ USAS can allocate types (that is, each unique word studied over all its instances in a text) to 50 predefined categories according to an algorithm that combines “general likelihood ranking (derived from corpus and dictionary evidence), disambiguation by part-of-speech, participation in multiword expressions and topic information” (Koller et al., 2008, p. 144). Because USAS allocates both best-choice and secondary semantic tags to each lexical item, it is possible to identify those items that belong to multiple domains. For example, “backbone” is allocated to three domains: anatomy and physiology (part of the body), importance (a central feature), and toughness or strength (the backbone to tackle a problem). Semantic tagging allows the potential metaphoric power in a text to be identified. This method means that at least common metaphors can be both inductively and quantitatively studied at the same time; that is, the researcher does not need to know what metaphors she or he is looking for and can search large amounts of text for potential metaphors relatively quickly, although instances must still be analyzed individually in context once identified. Corpus-assisted discourse analysis of this kind typically involves cycling between analysis of frequencies and close analysis of the text (Koller & Mautner, 2004).

The USAS semantic tagger was applied to a set of English-language news texts from six places from May 1 to 31, 2017, capturing the build-up to and response to the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing on May 14–15, 2017. Four news outlets were chosen from each of India, Pakistan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Africa through the Factiva news database. Elite news outlets were initially preferred, on the grounds that they were most likely to employ their own correspondents, so as to ensure a diversity of texts, and that they were likely to contribute to strategic narrative development. One national broadcaster was included in each national subsample. However, the sampling was adjusted in places because some regional news media, such as the *Balochistan Times*, produced large numbers of texts and because some subsamples were small and the number of news outlets had to be increased. Thus, more outlets were added in Australia, and all African news media available through the database were included. In total, 526,529 words of text were gathered from the Factiva database using the search string “belt and road and China,” comprising 816 news texts, once the data had been cleaned of irrelevant texts. The presence of BBC Monitoring reports skewed the results slightly, as they included full texts of speeches given by political leaders, who often used a metaphor-rich discourse. See the Appendix for a list of news outlets and the number of texts in each sample within the corpus.

⁴ We wish to thank Dr. Paul Rayson at Lancaster University for providing us advice and access to WMatrix.

The corpus was then loaded into WMatrix and semantically tagged by USAS. The tags were then compared with the written-information subcorpus of the British National Corpus and ranked according to keyness, or how distinctive each semantic category was when compared with semantic categories found across English written-information genres. The top 10 to 20 semantic categories were then analyzed manually in instances where the tagger produced more than one semantic tag for a word (and therefore a potential metaphor), stopping when a category was no longer distinctive (keyness log likelihood = 1).

Computational approaches to metaphor identification and analysis are in their infancy (see also Berber Sardinha, 2008, 2012). The method described above was successful in identifying conventional metaphoric expressions, such as the “backbone” example already noted. However, it was less successful at identifying novel metaphors. Novel metaphors are defined by Bowdle and Gentner (2005) as those in which the listener must actively think about the connection between target and source domains to understand the intended meaning. USAS relies on repeated usages to determine meaning, so it was, by nature, less likely to find novel word use; these were often one-off usages that a keyness analysis missed. To identify those metaphors reliably, each text was examined closely to look for metaphors using the MIPVU metaphor identification procedure (Steen et al., 2010). This approach, like Koller et al.’s (2008), assumes that metaphors are comparisons across domains and directs the researcher to instances where a lexical item has two distinct meanings, one readable from the context and one basic meaning, and where there is some ground on which they are being compared (Pasma, 2011). The metaphors were then ranked according to how frequent or distinctive they were, and the corpus analysis tool was used to search for further instances. This manual method was successful at finding a different set of metaphors, although it is acknowledged that some instances were missed given the size of the corpus. Together, the two methods allowed us to probe the metaphor use in the news texts in both breadth and depth.

Results and Analysis

The data point in two contradictory directions. The computer-assisted analysis suggests the widespread use of a set of conventional metaphors that tends to build on or even extend the Chinese state’s strategic discourse, although with distinct national differences. The close analysis suggests that novel metaphors were used highly consciously, sometimes explicitly labeled as metaphors. The latter set often cast doubt on the Chinese Dream as an imaginary.

Computer-Assisted Analysis

WMatrix identified multiple key semantic sets. Most of these were not metaphoric but showed simple polyvalence and are ignored here. Those that were metaphoric were often coherent with the overall belt-and-road metaphoric set. At the systemic level, much of the news discourse appeared to build on the Chinese state’s strategic discourse.

The data were rich in metaphors of transport, movement, connection, change, building, and mental states. Among the most common semantic sets was the set termed in WMatrix as “vehicles and

transport," with the image of "road" dominant (at 2,299 instances), as one would expect, given that it was in the title of the initiative. Alongside that image were several other metaphoric usages from the same semantic set, including "connect" and variants such as "connecting" or "connection," "link" and variants, "path," "run," and "drive." The lexical item "connect" occurred 92 times across the 816 texts, sometimes in literal usages to do with railways or roads but often in a broader sense, such as, "a flagship for aiming to connect the neighborhoods of East and West Asia" (*Balochistan Times*, May 15, 2017, p. 40). The Nigerian *Vanguard* wrote: "At a summit in Beijing at the beginning of the month, Xi pledged 124 billion dollars for the plan, promising to forge a path of peace, inclusiveness and free trade" (May 25, 2017, Factiva database).

Metaphors of moving ("journey," "rising," "explore") also arose in many texts. This discourse of transport across Eurasia was accompanied by the metaphor of "ties," which occurred 252 times to describe the business, political, and personal relationships associated with the initiative. Much of the usage of these metaphors was, as in the previous example, in a quotation or paraphrase of political leaders or in association with China, as in, "In fact, China's longstanding attempts to forge closer ties with Turkey have usually been tepidly received" (*The Washington Post*, May 16, 2017). A parallel set of metaphors included "build," "construction," and "develop," the last used in the secondary sense of changing the conceptual state of something and in its literal sense. The UK-based *Financial Times* wrote of "President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road plan, first promulgated in 2013, to build better relations with China's Eurasian trading partners" (May 27, 2017, p. 18).

When analyzed with surrounding text, these metaphors of transport, ties, and building tended to reinforce and extend the belt-and-road metaphor as a strategy for harmonious codevelopment between countries. That is, the meaning of the BRI was the construction of a belt to tie countries and businesses together, leading to the rise of mutually beneficial relationships. The images tended to be positive, although not universally, as in "the rising tide of Chinese nationalism" (*Hindu*, May 7, 2017). However, they were much more likely to be positive when they were of the type of pervasive, mundane metaphor that organizes the possibility of thought, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) theorize metaphor. News texts did not necessarily endorse that set of meanings, but they reproduced it through their attempts to describe and explain the initiative and the motivations behind it.

This metaphoric set was used across the corpus, but was much more common in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan than in the United States, India, and Africa. For example, "path" (such as in "paths to prosperity") occurred only three times in Indian and U.S. samples and five times in African samples, but 11 times in the Pakistani sample, 13 times in the UK sample, and 17 times in the Australian sample. The African and U.S. samples, because they were smaller, were harder to detect trends in. This pattern of distribution was consistent across the metaphors. The Chinese state's strategic discourse was therefore more deeply embedded in the United Kingdom, Pakistan, and Australia.

A less prominent but significant set of metaphors concerned mental states. The BRI was described as a "vision" 222 times across the 816 texts (ranking at position 111 in texts' keyness), as in, "Xi's 21st-century vision to deploy infrastructure and capital to boost China's influence" (*Australian*, May 27, 2017, p. 15). The initiative was described as a "dream" 72 times, commonly in the phrase "Chinese

dream” or “China’s Asia Dream,” or in relation to Xi himself so that the initiative was represented as residing within his mind. Again, this usage was not evenly spread across the samples, with the United States in particular far less likely to describe the BRI metaphorically as a mental state (it was a “vision” only four times in U.S. texts, as opposed to 59 in Pakistani texts) and a “dream” four times in the U.S. texts and five times in African texts, as opposed to nine times in the UK texts and 25 times in Australian texts). These emphases on an imaginary domain predominated in quotations of political leaders and analyses concerned with the conceptual level of the initiative. India was much more likely to describe the BRI in neutral terms as a “project” (287 times) or “corridor” (245 times), referencing the contested China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. Again, the extent to which news media allowed the Chinese state to reimagine global trade and infrastructure was greatest in Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Close Analysis

The close analysis sought out metaphoric usages not identified by the corpus-driven approach. This led us to pick out a large number of other metaphors, mostly novel metaphors (that is, those that require listeners to consciously connect the two domains [Bowdle and Gentner, 2005]). Metaphors that recurred or were highly significant in interpreting BRI are listed in Table 1, ranked by sample size, and then by frequency and distinctiveness within each sample.

A small proportion of the novel metaphors identified through the close analysis were semantically similar to the conventional metaphors that arose through the computer-assisted analysis. In particular, metaphors of journey, close to the transport metaphors noted above, were found, as were other action-related metaphors. The UK-based *Guardian*, for example, explained BRI in a background paragraph as “a potentially historic Chinese infrastructure campaign that could transform swathes of the developing world” (May 15, 2017). Elsewhere, business metaphors such as “mega-venture” or “engine” of growth were used. These tended toward the conventional, embedding the Chinese discursive move, rather than fostering vivid images that would encourage readers to rethink it. But the vast majority of novel metaphors were outside these semantic structures, and their novelty arose in pushing beyond the Chinese state’s meaning. The texts were busy with interpretation and with attempts to establish BRI’s meaning in the news outlets’ own cultural terms. The majority of these did so in ways that sought to contain or contest the ideas.

Table 1. Close Analysis of Metaphors.

Country	Sample Size (Words)	Novel Metaphors of BRI
UK	134,060	(1) concept, slogan (2) strategy, gambit, ruse (3) vehicle, tool (4) trap (5) white elephant (6) campaign
India	101,895	(1) colonial, empire (2) debt trap (3) Trojan horse (4) India's Achilles' heel (5) venture (6) dragon beckons (7) Marshall Plan; rejection of comparison to the Marshall Plan (8) a great wall of paranoia
Pakistan	98,343	(1) game changer/fate changer (2) economic blast/economic catalyst (3) house, family (4) crossroads that joins people and regions (5) a new wave of globalization (6) China's Westward expansion (7) beginning/harbinger of a new era of humanity (8) a joint leap, commitment in journey (9) the bandwagon of China-backed prosperity (10) concept where cultures meet (11) golden chance (12) effective recipe (13) the center of gravity (14) a global commons; metaphor for a new world (15) historic venture (16) rejection of metaphors (such as Marshall Plan, geopolitical maneuvering, new era of imperialism, zero-sum game)
Australia	90,493	(1) Eurasian/geopolitical gambit, geopolitical machinations (including metaphors of torpedo, push back against, Sino-centric world order) (2) play, game

		(3) problem shifter
		(4) stunning synthesis
		(5) journey
		(6) symbol, concept, idea, slogan
		(7) way of life
		(8) label, brand
U.S.	65,974	(1) party, show
		(2) power play; Beijing's new world order
		(3) imperial venture/expansionists
		(4) new form of colonialism
		(5) alternative to a Western-driven agenda
		(6) strategy
		(7) war, battle
		(8) lofty mantra
		(9) Marshall Plan
Africa	35,764	(1) engine, driver
		(2) revolution, new world order
		(3) Marshall Plan

A large set of metaphoric usages worked to bracket BRI as something of unclear or limited meaning, often in a syntax that made explicit the act of comparison and therefore reinterpretation. Described systematically as Xi's "vision" or through use of related conventional metaphors of mental state, as noted above, the BRI was also often redefined as a mere "concept" or "slogan," particularly in British and some Australian media. The vision was represented as losing touch with reality. The *Financial Times* (May 4, 2017) quoted Wilbur Ross, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce: "They are talking about the Silk Road and all that stuff. Those are concepts. Those are not trade agreements" (Asian Infrastructure and Trade Report, May 4, p. 2). The BBC (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, May 16, 2017, para. 2) cited Russian newspapers saying that "it looks more like 'the concept of scientific development.'" For the UK-based *Times* (May 15, 2017), the concept was "highly elastic, with the Belt and Road slogan tacked on to a myriad of schemes, and has raised concerns in some quarters about Chinese geopolitical aims" (section T2, p. 32). In stark contrast to Xi's statement that "The 'Belt and Road' construction has gradually transformed from concept to action, and from vision to reality" (Xinhua, cited in BBC, May 15, 2017 [Factiva database]), these media outlets used figurative language that positioned the initiative as restricted to the level of concept. It was "Beijing's lofty rhetoric" (BBC, May 11, 2017); there was a "large gap between the overblown rhetoric" and "prosaic reality" (*Financial Times*, May 8, 2017, USA ed., p. 5). Only in Pakistani media was the word "concept" used in a positive sense that implied an impact on the world, in a quotation from a Punjabi politician that "the initiative was an innovative and trailblazing concept" (*News International*, May 15, 2017, p. 27). In this way, the geopolitical power of the metaphoric set of the belt, road, journey, and building was redefined in most news texts, weakening its capacity to make sense of world development and trade.

Novel metaphoric language was used to redefine BRI still more explicitly through metatextual reference that cast the language of China into question. BRI was at times interpreted as a discursive move on the level of geopolitics, as a "move" in a game by China. In the UK media, the terms "strategy," (*Financial Times*, May 4, 5, 8, 12, 14, 15, 30, 2017), "gambit," (*Financial Times* Asian Infrastructure and Trade Report, May 4, 2017, p. 4; *Guardian*, May 12, 2017) and "ruse" (*Guardian*, May 15, 16, 2017) were used; in one Australian text the BRI was "an ambitious thought bubble" (*Conversation*, May 4, 2017); in Australian, British, and U.S. outlets, it was a "play for global power," (*Australian*, May 12, 2017, p. 13), a "power play" (*Age*, May 13, 14, 2017, p. 6; *Dow Jones Institutional News*, May 30, 2017; *Financial Times* Asian Infrastructure and Trade Report, May 4, 2017, p. 5). In some media from the UK, India, and elsewhere it was a "vehicle" for Chinese influence (e.g. *Financial Times*, May 4, 2017), potentially a "trap" for China and others, as in the comment, "a potential 'trap', entangling them in everything from unproductive investments to regional disputes" (*Financial Times*, May 12, 2017, Factiva database). In a number of media the importance of the projects not becoming "white elephants" was stressed. Such language further removes BRI from the plane of the real to the plane of talk and of politics and planning. U.S. media took this a step beyond metaphor to allusive vignettes. Their coverage of BRI was infrequent, but the reporting frequently likened images of the launch with others that undercut it, such as North Korea launching a missile or Russian president Vladimir Putin playing old Russian classics on a piano:

While Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi insists that One Belt One Road "is not China's solo, but a symphony," the most enthusiastic players are the region's like-minded authoritarians.

At Beijing's summit, it was Vladimir Putin who picked up the musical theme with a rendition of "Moscow Windows" on a grand piano. (*Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fitting-into-beijings-new-world-order-1496136635>)

Here the common Chinese metaphor of its geopolitical endeavor as a symphony was not only questioned but placed on the plane of the absurd.

Such metatextual moves focusing on Beijing's language were common. A number of texts contained voices cautioning about BRI by foregrounding the search for an appropriate metaphor, in explicit rejection of aspects of the belt-and-road semantic set. *The Times of India* asked if the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Pakistan-Chinese dimension of BRI, was "a Trojan horse" and concluded that "the sweeping and ambitious scale of the plans as revealed by Pakistani press reports, incline one towards the 'Trojan horse' metaphor" (*The Times of India*, May 25, 2017). The *Australian* (May 26, 2017) ran the headline, "Belt, yes, road, yes. But we need to buckle up and drive with care" (p. 14). In these ways, the metaphoric nature of the BRI was brought to the surface. It is a common metaphoric move in political journalism to position politics as a strategy or game (Hellsten, 1997). What is striking here, however, is the explicitly heuristic nature of these metaphors; the BRI was posed as an object whose meaning could flip between opposing meanings and was therefore something to be highly cautious of.

This was certainly the case with the most explicit analogy, that of the Marshall Plan. It was cited almost universally in the context of being dismissed as inadequate or wrong-footed, both by commentators

from each country and then by Chinese sources quoted in the country's media. There are 47 direct references to the plan in the corpus, mostly in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. For example: "the plan has the potential to massively overshadow the US' post-war Marshall reconstruction plan, involving about 65% of the world's population, one-third of its GDP and helping to move about a quarter of all its goods and services" (*Guardian*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/12/the-900bn-question-what-is-the-belt-and-road-initiative>). Commentator Paul Kelly in the *Australian* wrote explicitly that "the analogy is weak" (May 24, 2017, p. 14). It operated, therefore, less as a metaphor and more as a reference point, invoking another geopolitical narrative. And it operated negatively, distancing BRI from that narrative and making the initiative less familiar to those knowledgeable of historic Western geopolitics. The grounds of the (failed) comparison differed between commentators. For some, the BRI was not a fulfillment of the Marshall Plan because it was much larger; for others, because it was not a gift but a loan; for others, because it was not democratic; for others, because it was disconnected from military or other alliances but open to all countries. Regardless of the grounds on which the analogy failed, the BRI emerged from this commentary as something that was decidedly not a reiteration of the start of postwar American world economic and political dominance.

In only two countries' media, more settled metaphoric sets stood out that gave BRI substantial geopolitical meaning. In Pakistan, an enthusiastic set of references across the media outlets referred to the initiative as a "game-changer," linking the conceptual geopolitics to practical action in ways that contrasted with all the other countries' media. In India, the metaphor of colonialism was common.

Pakistani media reached for a broad set of novel metaphors that connected ideas to action and embraced BRI as a geopolitical shift. CPEC was described as a "game-changer" for Pakistan, and the broader BRI as a "game-changer" for the wider world because, as one journalist paraphrased former Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz as saying, "it will set the tone transcending many cultures, borders and ideologies" (*News International*, May 16, 2017, p. 27). Unlike Western media, the initiative attracted metaphors in Pakistan of change in which ideas impacted the real: It was a "revolution" (*News International*, May 8, 15; *Balochistan Times*, May 27, 2017), "catalyzer" (*Balochistan Times*, May 27, 2017), "harbinger of connectivity" (*News International*, May 15, 2017), "effective recipe" (*Balochistan Times*, May 11, 15, 2017). In other texts the scheme attracted vivid metaphors of movement: "a joint leap towards making the world a global village" (*Balochistan Times*, May 17, 2017), promising an "economic take off" for the country (*Balochistan Times*, May 5, 2017). Pakistani texts were characterized by the most active rhetorical use of metaphors. There is some evidence of a collective propaganda effort to popularize the initiative—to address, in the words of a senior official, the need to "create awareness among people, build positive narrative of the project and counter negative propaganda" (as quoted in *News International*, May 24, 2017, p. 27). Australian media also reached at times for richly metaphoric language that sought to communicate the scale of the initiative:

This is only a footnote though in a most powerful message that has been propelled around the world: China has rolled up its sleeves ready to do stuff to boost global prosperity as Xi the Sun King extends its "golden age." (*Australian*, May 20, 2017, section 3, p. 12)

Here again, BRI is comprehended with transformative metaphors that alter state relations for mutual gain.

The Indian media reached frequently for images of power, but of a highly critical kind that implied instead unequal power relations. Indian media texts included language of colonialism more frequently than media from other countries (13 instances of the word “colonial,” as opposed to 7 in UK media and one each in African and U.S. media, and no instances elsewhere). *The Times of India*, for example, made the analogy explicit: “To the extent accurate historical analogies exist to China’s OBOR [One Belt One Road], they come from the colonial past” (May 19, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/silk-road-to-go/articleshow/58723848.cms>). This language was accompanied by other metaphors of disempowerment, such as “Achilles’ heel” (*Press Trust of India*, May 18, 2017), and the use of longstanding images of China as negatively powerful, such as “the dragon’s sway” (*Hindu*, May 18, 2017). One Indian article by academic Zorowar Daulet Singh engaged critically with a broad set of traditional anti-Chinese and cold war metaphors, from the “great wall of paranoia” (*Hindu*, May 18, 2017) to “China’s spell,” “the dragon,” “bandwagoning,” and “proverbial dominoes,” that he saw as shaping the Indian political rejection of involvement in the initiative (*Hindu*, May 18, 2017). Some U.S. outlets drew on similar metaphors of Chinese dominance, although to a lesser extent. The *Wall Street Journal* (May 15, 2017) was most clear, offering a rereading of the metaphor of the Silk Road as imperial expansion:

In Sunday’s speech, Mr. Xi frequently harked back to the ancient caravan and maritime routes dating back two millennia that he said carried ideas as well as goods between civilizations.

Some Asian diplomats said by putting the forum in Beijing, rather than in the ancient Silk Road terminus of Xi’an, invoked an image of China’s imperial past, with smaller states “paying tribute to the emperor.” (p. A9)

The vast economic power of China exhibited in BRI projects easily lends itself to overlapping images from the past of imperial China—yellow peril and then red threat (see Yang, 2016). They perhaps lie behind some of the reframing and caution of the novel metaphors. Yet the breadth of the novel metaphoric set around BRI suggests something that is also complex, a space of active contestation of both old and new imaginaries, as we next discuss.

Discussion

The computer-assisted analysis shows the embeddedness of the Chinese-state imaginary of the Belt and Road Initiative in English-language news discourse throughout the period around the May 2017 Beijing summit. Except in U.S. media, which had little coverage, a coherent metaphoric set of terms to do with transport, movement, connection, ties, change, and building and a smaller set to do with vision and dreams ran systematically through the data. This set of conventional metaphors about BRI, which the software was well suited to identify, can be thought of as structuring the news discourse. As Fiske (1987) notes, conventional metaphors in the news can be argued to naturalize values and therefore carry hidden meaning (see also Hellsten, 1997). A broad narrative of the mutual benefits arising from China’s geopolitical activities provided the base notes for the coverage. Commentator Tim Summers noted that “the metaphor of Silk Road is itself a sort of soft power, conjuring images of a past age of openness, connectivity, peaceful trade, cultural exchange . . . in which China was a central player” (as quoted in Crabtree & Ming, para. 29).

Our computer-assisted analysis shows that the Chinese state successfully introduced this metaphoric set into English-language media discourse across the world.

Yet the news texts were rhetorically more complex in their metaphor use than that first analysis suggests. As Koller (2004) found in a study of metaphors used in news magazines to describe businesswomen, language users are often conscious of the metaphors they use, extending them into new usages and making them explicit at a metatextual level. That happened here. Not only was the Chinese official discourse richly metaphoric, but novel metaphors were widely deployed in English-language media. They operated predominantly to question, contest, and manage the strategic challenge of BRI to long-standing Western-oriented notions of the global and of China. Countries differed markedly in their rhetoric, in ways that reflected the official positions and perceived national interests of those countries. Indian and U.S. news drew on metaphors expressing concern over Chinese power. The metaphors used in countries dependent on trade with China, such as Pakistan, Australia, and countries in Africa, drew on a wide range of metaphors, while in the UK the discourse was one of critical questioning of the initiative's meaning. Thus, the coverage of the BRI summit broadly conforms with the conclusions of international communication scholarship. International news is translated for domestic audiences (Clausen, 2004) and rarely steps outside of the national interest (Nossek, 2004).

Yet this coverage was also distinctive in two respects. First, the metaphor use did not reinforce old strategic narratives; second, it was strikingly metatextual. Old geopolitical metaphors of the dragon or containment of communism or, indeed, of the Marshall Plan were not given status as alternative ways to understand China's geopolitical position. We would argue that their absence (or rejection, in the case of the Marshall Plan) here is significant, given their historic power to organize the mediated understanding of China. China's connectedness and its building of further connections across Eurasia and beyond therefore gained a measure of legitimacy. Yet the metaphoric space of BRI was at the same time made highly unstable through an explicit emphasis on the metaphoric nature of the whole endeavor. As texts reproduced the belt-and-road imagery, they also asked whether it was just a metaphor and whether, indeed, metaphors of a Trojan horse or colonialism were more appropriate. An Australian Associated Press correspondent wrote: "China is contriving to build bridges, both literal and metaphorical" (May 14, 2017, Factiva database). Metaphor was therefore a figurative activity, a matter of persuasion, analysis, and criticism, and the belt-and-road emerged as a consciously observed linguistic object whose relationship to reality was not a given. This is perhaps partly because belt-and-road is a double metaphor and a difficult one, in which the "belt" refers to land-based connections and the "road" refers to maritime links. The self-consciousness of metaphoric use is explicable in part as reflecting commentators' awareness of the ambition and political positioning embedded in the term but also in part as a search within English-language media to find other, easier metaphors. In any case, the coverage of this enormous economic and political endeavor cannot be sufficiently described as a set of representations and needs to be seen as a set of often self-conscious semantic moves.

Conclusion

Was the BRI summit a moment when the Chinese state embedded a new geopolitical narrative in global media discourse? Greater distance is needed to even begin to make such an argument. But our close

analysis of the metaphoric language in English-language news media has shown the great discursive effort that has gone into making sense of China on the world stage. Discursive work was done both to prise open the Western global image of China and to contest and cast light on that rhetorical act. Just as strategic narrative theory brings into focus the deployment of discursive power, metaphor analysis brings into focus a key mode through which China's geopolitical position is made sense of, it and reminds us of the performative, rhetorical nature of this power.

The analysis also foregrounds the reflexive nature of that work. Diplomatic correspondents and commentators took the attempt to reimagine China's global position as the object of their discourse, deploying a range of often highly critical analogies and metaphors. That raises an interesting set of questions rarely engaged with in the strategic narrative literature. What happens to the power to produce certain images when their mediated reception is hyperconscious, even ironic (as was the case with the U.S. coverage mentioned here)? Are such narratives, like advertising, diminished when the hearer is listening for the strategic moves? This is particularly important in relation to understanding China's self-positioning, given what Rosen (2012) calls the "Chinese problem": that it lacks global credibility in the space of culture and political ideology. We would therefore propose further research that looks closely at irony, metaphor, and other rhetorical moves through which journalists, commentators, and other nonstate voices negotiate state-originated strategic discourse. We would suggest that those moves are important elements in the processes by which geopolitical imaginaries are changed or by which attempts to change those imaginaries are resisted.

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Appendix: News Outlets and Sample Size.

Country	<i>n</i> Articles	News Outlet
United States	46	Dow Jones Institutional News
		New York Times
		Washington Post
		CNN
Australia	122	Australian
		Australian Financial Review
		AAP MediaNet Press Releases
		Australian Associated Press
		Age
		AAP Bulletins
		West Australian
		Conversation
		Ralph Wragg Australian Business News
		Canberra Times
		Kalgoorlie Miner
		Press Association National Newswire
		Northern Territory News
		Sun Herald
		Resources News (RWE)
India	201	Western Advocate
		Sydney Morning Herald
		Advertiser
Pakistan	178	Press Trust of India
		Hindu
United Kingdom	215	Times of India
		Balochistan Times
		Dawn
		Pakistan Business News
Africa	54	News International
		Times
		Guardian
		BBC
		Financial Times
		All Africa
		Vanguard (Nigeria)

		The Sun (Nigeria)
		Ethiopian News Agency
		This Day (Nigeria)
		African Business
Total	816	39
